

# The Fauna of Narcondam Island<sup>1</sup>

## Part 1. Birds

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In the *Journal* for August 1971, I had a note on a fleeting visit to Narcondam Island in the Bay of Bengal, when I could only stay for a few hours. It was evident that a regular collecting trip was necessary over a longer period and with the assistance of the Charles McCann Vertebrate Zoology Field Work Fund (see *J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc.* 70: 244) I arranged for Messrs S. A. Hussain, Research Assistant, Bombay Natural History Society, and N. J. George, Assistant, Natural History Section, Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay, to visit the island.

They reached Port Blair on 12 March 1972 and on the 14th left by a police launch via Maya Bunder in North Andamans arriving at Narcondam on 16 March. They stayed till the 14th April and during this time collected 48 birds, some mammals, reptiles, and other zoological material. The present paper deals with the birds. The field notes, unless otherwise specified, are from the notes kept by Messrs Hussain and George. The number of birds noted and/or collected is very small, and hardly half a dozen species, including the hornbill discovered just a hundred years ago, are resident. For the sake of completeness the earlier notes and specimens in the Bombay collection are incorporated. Mr Hussain also assisted me at the Society's rooms while I was working out the collection.

The collection though smaller than anticipated includes the following new records:

*Dicrurus leucophaeus leucogenys*

*Muscicapa parva albicilla*

*Phylloscopus inornatus inornatus*

*Phylloscopus tenellipes tenellipes*

*Zoothera sibirica davisoni*

Thirty-three birds collected in the Andaman Islands on the journey to and from Narcondam are not dealt with in this note.

The serial numbers relate to S. Dillon Ripley's A SYNOPSIS OF THE BIRDS OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN (1961) with additions made in subsequent literature. The measurements are in millimetres. I am grateful to Dr Ripley and his Research Assistant Mr Gorman M. Bond at the Smithsonian Institution for the identification of some of the specimens, particularly the *Phylloscopi*.

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<sup>1</sup> Received September 1973.

43 *Ardeola bacchus* (Bonaparte). Chinese Pond Heron

1 ♀ 3 April 1970

Not seen on this trip.

51 *Egretta sacra* (Gmelin). Eastern Reef Heron

1 ♂ 12 April 1972

Frequently seen on rocks, all dark grey.

The tails are slightly smaller than recorded in FAUNA and repeated in INDIAN HANDBOOK (1:77).

7 ♂♂ 84-91 av. 87.7; 2 ♀♀ 84, 88; (IH ♂♀ 93-98)

*Accipiter* sp.

I had noted a small dark hawk (chasing a kingfisher) which remains unidentified. Osmaston (1905) saw two small hawks resembling *Astur* in flight circling round the top of the mountain.

173 *Haliaeetus leucogaster* (Gmelin). Whitebellied Sea Eagle

Quite frequently seen on island—four at one time.

As on the last occasion this bird was seen being mobbed by hornbills.

345 *Amaurornis phoenicurus insularis* Sharpe. Andaman White-breasted Waterhen

1 ♀ 23 April 1970

Only seen in one area.

386 *Numenius phaeopus variegatus* (Scopoli). Whimbrel

1 ♀ 8 April 1972

Frequently seen. Settled in trees along shore. When cataloguing the birds in the Bombay Collection, I said that I was unable to decide if any of the material was *variegatus* and listed all, including birds from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, under the nominate race. We have since received by exchange a pair of *variegatus* from Japan, and it does appear that some of the specimens, particularly those from the Andaman and Nicobar islands, are of this race, being distinguished by :

- (a) the streaking/markings on the lower back and the rump *contra* pure white,
- (b) the heavier and duskier markings on the upperparts,
- (c) the heavier streaking on the breast, extending further on to the belly and the flanks,
- (d) the barring on the axillaries being more pronounced and heavier, all the bars meeting at the shaft in the centre.

Two specimens, Nos. 21910 (Andamans) and 23260 (Camorta, Nicobars), agree completely with the Japanese birds. Seven others (1 Pulicat, Madras, 1 Narcondam, 2 Andamans, 2 Car Nicobar, 1 Great Nicobar)

do not show all the characters listed above, but appear to be different from specimens from western India. Though I can find no references to seasonal changes of plumage, it may be mentioned that all the western specimens were obtained in August-November while the eastern birds are between March and May. Curiously, the 9 western birds include only one female, while 8 of the 11 eastern are females.

The specimen obtained on Narcondam has a white rump, but shows the other characters of *variegatus*. Provision would perhaps have to be made for an intermediate population showing characters of both races. The two groups show no differences in size but the wing measurements are smaller than those indicated for European birds in HANDBOOK OF BRITISH BIRDS (4 : 176) :

		Wing	Bill	Tail
11 ♂♂	Indian & Japanese (BR. HAND.	224-238 av. 232 232-250	62-84 av. 76·5 76-86	91-97 av. 93·5 87-99)
9 ♀♀	Indian & Japanese (BR. HAND.	229-247 av. 238 243-265	77-90 av. 84·5 80-90	89-102 av. 97 —)

401 *Tringa hypoleucos* Linnaeus (Sweden). Common Sandpiper

1 ♀ 8 April 1972

Frequent.

402 *Arenaria interpres interpres* (Linnaeus). Turnstone

Noted by Osmaston (1905).

471 *Sterna anaethetus anaethetus* Scopoli. Brownwinged Tern

On 23 April 1969, a male settled on the boat off Narcondam.

508a *Ducula aenea andamanica* Abdulali. Andaman Green Imperial Pigeon

3 : 1 ♂\* 1 ♀ 1 o?

Wing 235\*, 229, 232 ; bill 24, 25, 27\* ; tail 145(3)

No evidence of nesting, but frequently seen in ones and twos.

All three are shiny green above and have shorter tails than the Andaman birds (♂♂ 155-161, ♀♀ 154-162), but a ♂ collected on an earlier trip is darker above and measures wing 239, tail 157. One wonders if the extent of the sheen on the upperparts is just an individual variation, as apparently accepted.

509 *Ducula bicolor* (Scopoli). Pied Imperial Pigeon

2 : 1 ♂ 1 ♀

None were visible near the camp, but a nesting colony was found on a rocky islet, about 70 feet high, off the north coast, which could be waded to at low tide. Small trees grew out of the cracks in the rocks, and one about 12 feet high held 8 nests, all of the usual sketchy type distinctive

of the family. When examined, most of the nests held a single chick, of various ages, while others still contained an egg. Some of the nests could be reached by hand by climbing up the hillside. The number of nests was estimated at about a hundred. When disturbed the birds flew directly to the main island and settled on trees. Occasionally, three or four would soar high up and drop downwards together for some distance on closed wings, and then glide away to a perch.

**Streptopelia orientalis** subsp. Rufous Turtle-Dove

George twice noted a pigeon which he thought was this species but no specimen was obtained.

**544 Chalcophaps indica maxima** Hartert. Emerald Dove

1 ♀ Wing 143 ; bill 18 ; tail 89

A few seen.

The single specimen appears nearest to another female from Camorta, Central Nicobar (Abdulali 1967 : 168).

**548 Psittacula eupatria magnirostris** (Ball). Large Andaman Parakeet

2 ♀♀ Wing 194, 204; bill 37, 38 ; tarsus 19, 19; tail 300, 304.

Common. Three pairs were nesting at varying heights on one *Salmalia insigne* on the shore line near the camp. All the nests contained young and their *chiri . . . chrr* was often heard outside. A female collected had her mouth full of caterpillars !

[**555 Psittacula longicaudata tytleri** (Hume). Redcheeked Parakeet

Hume (1874, *Stray Feathers* 2 : 184) refers to this species being found on Barren and Narcondam islands, but Osmaston has already suggested that the latter record was in mistake.]

**592 Eudynamis scolopacea dolosa** Ripley. Andaman Koel

5 : 3 ♂♂ 2 ♀♀ 22nd to 28th March 1972.

	Wing	Bill	Tarsus	Tail
♂♂	195, 196, 209	30, 31, 1-1	32, 32, 33	190, 190, 203
♀♀	190, 200	32, 32	35, 35	184, 185

Upon arrival they were very common but they appeared to have diminished in number by mid April. The several calls were prominent early in the morning and in the evening, and sometimes at night. Some of the specimens were very fat on the belly, and there was no evidence of their breeding here. Osmaston (1905) had noted them as common in early October and thought they were cold-weather visitors.

**618a Otus scops modestus** (Walden). Andaman Scops Owl

One caught in a net on 8th April was pulled out and completely destroyed by one of the dogs in the camp. The few breast-feathers and

portions of a wing which were recovered agree closely with the single ♀ from South Andamans available for comparison.

The call *whoo-uk, whoo-uk* heard at night, high up on the hill, was attributed to this species.

679 *Caprimulgus macrurus* subsp. Jungle Nightjar

A *chaunk chaunk* heard at night high up on the hill suggests this species which has a resident race in the Andamans.

*Apus* sp.

I had noted (1971) large black swifts soaring out of range. Hussain and George report some large swifts circling round a pair of soaring Sea Eagles much too high to attempt an identification.

*Collocalia* sp.

Numbers were seen ('thousands at the summit') but in the absence of specimens it is not possible to add anything to my querying of Osmaston's record of *C. brevirostris innominata* from Narcondam.

739 *Halcyon pileata* (Boddaert). Blackcapped Kingfisher

1 ♀ 30 April 1970; 1 ♀ 27 March 1972

Single birds were noted at three places along the shore.

These two females together with a third from Trinkut, Central Nicobars, appear to be brighter in colour than the others available from India.

748 *Merops philippinus philippinus* Linnaeus. Bluetailed Bee-eater

Noted by Osmaston, on passage (?), in early October.

1 ♀

762a *Eurystomus orientalis* subsp. Broadbilled Roller

1 ♀

In my last report (1971), I had referred to a single specimen with a very small bill obtained on Narcondam Island on 29 April 1970 which did not agree with any of the described races. Curiously, this large and conspicuous bird was not seen on the present trip.

773 *Rhyticeros (undulatus) narcondami* (Hume). Narcondam Hornbill

This was easily the most abundant species on the island and breeding was in full swing in March/April, some 73 nests of the standard hornbill type being noted at varying heights above about 6 ft. Hussain kept a daily list of male and female sightings and over the stay of 24 days, 728 male and 149 female sightings were recorded. The disparity in numbers is probably due to the females being mostly imprisoned in their nests, and the males being seen following regular lines of flight to and from the nests.

Two nests examined contained 2 eggs/young each.

Seeds of fruit eaten by both (?) the female and the young were piled up at the bottom of the nest. At least eight different species were prominent but even with the assistance of the Botanical Survey of India, it has only been possible to identify two—*Anamirta cocculus* (L.) W. & A. (Menispermaceae) and *Bassia longifolia* (L.) Macbride (Sapotaceae).

One egg, dirty brownish white in colour, measured 45 × 33.

A hornbill was seen chasing a male Koel and reference has already been made to several together mobbing a fishing eagle.

Two young, a male and a female, taken from the same nest have been brought to Bombay and now live noisily at the Society's premises in Hornbill House.

The species is protected and appears to be thriving on the island. Unless commercialized in some manner, I do not think that it is in danger and it need not have been put on to the I.U.C.N. Red List.

917 *Hirundo rustica gutturalis* Scopoli. Eastern Swallow

1 ♂ 1 ♀ 9 April 1972. Wing 112, 113

Considerable numbers appeared to be present on the island throughout the period and large numbers ('several hundreds') flew low over the bay during a drizzle on the day after a storm. On my last visit I had noted a large swallow with whitish underparts and a forked tail, which I could not identify.

950 *Lanius cristatus lucionensis* Linnaeus. Philippine Brown Shrike

1 ♂? 29 March 1972

A few seen.

This and another ♂ obtained on South Andaman on 20 April 1972 have grey heads and no bars on underparts.

966b *Dicrurus leucophaeus leucogenys* (Walden). Whitecheeked Grey Drongo

1 ♂ 24 March 1972

Others were seen in the same area. When picked up, hair-like feathers were noticed at the nape which are now seen with difficulty. Similar hair can be seen in dark specimens of the same species from Bhutan and the Eastern Ghats.

The subspecific identity has been determined by Mr Bond. This is an interesting record of this race from Indian limits, as one sent from the Andamans by Capt. Wimberley and identified by Hume as *leucogenys* has appeared under *D. l. salangensis* Reichenow in INDIAN HANDBOOK (5: 122). Mr Bond has drawn attention to the fact that the tail is in moult with the feather sheaths present, the dark tail-feathers being shed during the first winter and being replaced by grey ones, which in the present specimen project beyond the fork in the tail.

1018 *Gracula religiosa andamanensis* (Beavan). Andaman Hill Myna  
1 ♀ 23 April 1969 ; 1 ♀ 20 March 1972, ovaries enlarged

Small parties seen from time to time.

The two females (1 collected on an earlier trip) from Narcondam resemble *andamanensis* but are larger (wing 169, 170 *contra* 160-166 av. 162.7 ; tail 80, 89 *contra* 71-82 av. 77.75) and tend towards the Central Nicobar birds.

1407 *Muscicapa latirostris* Raffles. Brown Flycatcher

1 o? 12 April 1972

This is a well-known winter visitor to the Andamans, Car Nicobar, and to Camorta, Central Nicobars.

1412 *Muscicapa parva albicilla* Pallas. Eastern Redbreasted Flycatcher

1 ♂ 22 March 1972

This was identified by Mr Bond and is a new record, not only from Narcondam, but also from the Andaman group. Incidentally while attempting its identification it was noticed that three males of *M. subrubra* in the Bombay Natural History Society collection from Kashmir (2) and Point Calimere, in distinctive plumage, have the second primary shorter than the sixth as required in the Key in the INDIAN HANDBOOK (7 : 139) and not shorter than seventh as stated on page 159 (*loc. cit.*).

1549 *Phragmaticola aedon aedon* (Pallas). Thickbilled Warbler

1 ♂ 29 March 1972

In Indian literature the nominate race is accepted in the Andamans and Nicobars but Dementiev and others in BIRDS OF THE SOVIET UNION (1968) refer to *rufescens* Stegmann as the subspecies found in this area. With the material available it is not possible to confirm or deny this.

1586 *Phylloscopus fuscatus fuscatus* (Blyth). Siberian Dusky Leaf Warbler

1 ♂ 1 o? 26 and 31 March 1972

1592 *Phylloscopus inornatus inornatus* (Blyth). Siberian Yellow-browed Leaf Warbler

1 ♂ 1 o? 26 and 31 March 1972

This species has not been recorded previously from the Andaman and Nicobar islands.

1612a *Phylloscopus tenellipes tenellipes* Swinhoe. Palelegged Leaf Warbler

3 ♂♂ on 22, 23 and 29 March 1972

Except for a single specimen captured on a boat 10 miles east of Great Nicobar, there is no record of this species either from these islands or anywhere in Indian limits.

1732a *Zoothera sibirica davisoni* (Hume). Siberian Thrush

1 ♂ 6 April 1972

One was collected out of a party of four high up the hill where other birds were conspicuous by their absence. This was identified by Mr Bond. The only traceable record from the Andamans is a female (?) collected by Capt. Hodge at Port Blair and described as a new species *Oreocinclla inframarginata* by Blyth *Jour. Asiat. Soc. Bengal* 29 : 106 ; 1860. If further evidence shows that the Siberian Thrushes visiting this area are not of the nominate race, the name *inframarginata* would have priority over *davisoni*.

1762 *Turdus obscurus* Gmelin. Dark Thrush

2 ♂♂ 23 April 1969 and 20 April 1970

I had commented (op. cit.) on the last two trips each yielding a specimen of this thrush. It was not seen on this occasion.

1864 *Anthus cervinus* (Pallas). Redthroated Pipit

1 ♂ 5 April 1972. Wing 85 ; bill 12 ; tail 59

Only one seen on the edge of the forest.

In length, the bill can be matched with that of another from Prome, Burma, but it is much heavier than any of the seven redthroated adults available for comparison.

1874 *Motacilla indica* Gmelin. Forest Wagtail

1 ♀ 29 March 1972. Wing 77 (77-81) ; tail 68 (65-68)

Osmaston had seen it in the first week of October ; the present specimen was one of several seen.

1875/6 *Motacilla flava* subsp.

1 ♂

These birds were common on the rocks on the shore and would visit the drip from the freshwater pipe.

1884 *Motacilla caspica* subsp. Grey Wagtail

4 : 3 ♂♂ 1 ♀ 18, 20(2) and 28 March 1972. Wing 80(2), 82, 83 ; tail 87, 88, 89, 90

Two males are in almost full breeding plumage.

Vaurie (1959, BIRDS OF PAL. FAUNA : 87) accepts C. L. Brehm's *robusta* with tail 80-96 mm *contra* 92-103 in nominate *caspica* (*cinerea*). In an earlier paper, he has noted the nominate race from Andamans. The present specimens suggested the eastern form, but an examination of 26 males from Iraq, Chitral, Garhwal, Simla, Bombay and Kerala, in the Bombay collection, shows a tail range of 76-92 av. 87. Are they all *robusta* ?



1913 *Nectarinia jugularis andamanica* (Hume). Yellowbreasted or Olivebacked Sunbird

5 : 3 ♂♂ 2 ♀♀

The Narcondam birds have slightly larger wings than those from the Andamans, but the series available does not show any noticeable difference in colour.

	Wing	Bill	Tail
5 Andaman ♂♂	52, 53, 54(3)	19, —	33, 34
4 Narcondam ♂♂	56, 56.5, 58, 59	19, 20, 20, 21	34, 36, 36, 37
3 Andaman ♀♀	50, 53, 53	17.5, 19, —	29.5, 31, 31
2 Narcondam ♀♀	52.5, 55	18, 19.5	29, 34
(FAUNA	52-58	18-19	32-38)

The measurements include those of 3 males from Andamans borrowed from the Zoological Survey of India.

Osmaston (1905) said it was the commonest bird on the island and chiefly frequented the shore. An old typically sunbird nest was found about 3 feet from the ground.

As this paper is being published in the *Sálim Ali Festschrift* I take the opportunity of adding a few words. *Sálim Ali* was perhaps the first man I saw going round the countryside with a pair of Zeiss 8 × 40 slung round his neck. Having been permitted to peep through them, the acquirement of a similar pair became one of my life's ambitions, which I was fortunately able to realize with the help of a Sunday paper puzzle! In the early thirties I spent three long college holidays with him in Hyderabad and Travancore where he was carrying out ornithological surveys. During these expeditions, I got my first real introduction to collecting and field work and, a few years later, we jointly produced the *BIRDS OF BOMBAY AND SALSETTE*, the precursor of the several popular books which he has since written.

Most ornithological work in India has been carried out by people in the Imperial Services, keenly enthusiastic, but hindered by the fact firstly that they could only undertake the work as a hobby and, secondly, that they had no control over their transfers and movements and so no continuity of work was possible. Workers like E. C. Stuart Baker, Hugh Whistler, and C. B. Ticehurst carried on after retirement, but this work was necessarily of a taxonomic nature.

Over the last 50 years and even perhaps today, there is no living for a wholetime ornithologist in India. *Sálim Ali* however carried on and succeeded in making his hobby a successful profession enabling him to assist further research in the ornithological field. His position in Indian ornithology is unique, and will no doubt be sustained as such by his many books.

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